DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 295 CG 030 354

AUTHOR Russo, Thomas J.
TITLE Conducting Successful Open Meetings: A Manual for School Counselors.
PUB DATE 2000-10-05
NOTE 47p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Counselors; Democratic Values; Educational Innovation; Elementary School Teachers; Experimental Teaching; *Group Activities; *Participative Decision Making; Problem Solving; School Counselors; Student Participation

ABSTRACT

This paper presents information and strategies designed to enable teachers and counselors to understand, practice, and utilize the group process known as open classroom meetings. It considers the types of classroom meetings that can be utilized, such as social problem solving meetings, open-ended meetings, and educational diagnostic meetings. The variety of settings in which the meeting can be used and the range of student concerns that can be effectively considered in open meetings are outlined. It looks at the developmental aspects of the process of the meeting as they relate to classroom settings and presents ideas on how to evaluate them in specific school settings. Ten guidelines for conducting successful open classroom meetings are examined. Open meetings can have a variety of uses within the classroom and school setting. In addition to solving typical concerns that focus on climate issues, open meetings can become part of the overall approach to building a more democratic sense of community among students, teachers, and school staff. (Contains 14 references.) (JDM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 446 295

Conducting Successful Open Meetings: A Manual for School Counselors

Thomas J. Russo, Ph.D.

Department of Counseling & School Psychology

University of Wisconsin – River Falls

410 S. 3rd Street, WEB 225

River Falls, WI 54022

email: tom.j.russo@uwrf.edu

October 5, 2000

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

T. Russo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CG030354

CONDUCTING SUCCESSFUL OPEN MEETINGS

The many social problems of the school itself, some of which lead to the discipline of the students, are best attacked through the use of each class as a problem-solving group . . (Glasser,1969, pp.143-144).

Objectives

In this paper I present basic information and strategies designed to enable teachers and counselors to understand, practice and utilize the group process known as open classroom meetings. There are a few important theoretical constructs to consider when using open meetings. These theoretical concepts are taken largely from three distinct sources,(1) Rogerian models of helping,(2) Adlerian ideas about behavior, change and growth and most especially,(3) Glasser's Reality Therapy practices. These theories are widely reviewed elsewhere, so will here focus squarely on concepts that relate directly to the practice of the open classroom meeting. In reviewing research on open meetings, we will consider the variety of settings in

and the range of student concerns in which open meetings are used. We will also consider important developmental aspects of the process as related to classroom practice. In addition to giving information about the efficacy of open meetings, research on open classroom meetings will also reveal some useful and practical ideas about how to evaluate them in specific school settings. The three types of open meetings originally discussed by William Glasser (1969) will also be considered.

Finally, we will examine specific steps in conducting open classroom meetings. These procedures, as described in the theoretical and research literature, tend to be straightforward and allow the beginning facilitator to structure initial attempts before embarking on the journey itself. As we will see later, a sense of group cohesiveness can emerge over time as the structure of the open meeting process becomes a natural means of addressing individual and group concerns.

On the surface, open meetings seem like a relatively easy way to introduce students to aspects of group process,

and for the most part, I believe this is essentially the case. However, for significant change to occur, there needs to be a good balance of structure and process within the group so that the guidelines and restraints of the group format and the spontaneous interaction between members can be effectively managed. This later notion goes beyond merely implementing structure. Finding the necessary balance between content and process, structure and improvisation typically takes considerable practice and experience on the part of the facilitator. To begin this experiential process, numerous activities, exercises and questions for discussion will be provided. In this way, it is similar to a musician studying a piece of music. Initially, the composition itself is so well learned (perhaps "over learned") that the focus can become one of attending to the subtleties of the music and give it life and distinction with the structure of the piece itself. This takes time but hopefully this introduction to open meeting facilitation will provide a practical opportunity as well as a continuing checkpoint for your progress in conducting lively, engaging and effective open meetings.

Definition of the Open Classroom Meetings

Open meetings were first described in some detail in William Glasser's 1969 book, Schools Without Failure. Here, he gives an outline of three basic types of open meetings. They include, (1) Social problem solving meetings, (2) Open-ended meetings and (3) Educational diagnostic meetings.

Social Problem Solving Meetings. These are probably currently the most used in schools and the distinction between the three types of open meetings in practice often appears less important than when initially proposed by William Glasser. He defined the social problem solving meeting as " . . . an attempt to solve the educational problems of the class and the school."(p.144). In many respects this type of open meeting represents Glasser's attempt to bring a greater sense of democratic practice to classrooms and schools. Instead of relying on traditional hierarchical models of discipline, punishment and indoctrination into the culture of scho

open meetings represented a possible means to teach even very young children core principles of problem-solving in a group context. All participants could share equally in addressing classroom and school concerns that undermined or threatened the essential educational mission of the school. Because social problems are often embedded in the every nuances of school life, such groups are best facilitated by classroom and teachers and counselors who are well acquainted with the specific concerns of students.

Issues important to students can typically be the stuff of rumor and distortion among not just students but educational staff and even parents. In addition, social issues can be quite sensitive in that they may focus on a small group within the class and even an individual (for example in the instance of a student who is bullying or the victim of a bully).

Another important aspect of Social Problem Solving meetings is the leadership role of the counselor/teacher. While the basic intent of such groups is to lead toward a concrete resolution of the issue at hand, there are some

important skills to be considered and explicitly modeled by the facilitator.

Leading and directing. The facilitator takes complete responsibility for the structure of the group right down to sitting in a tight circle and proceeding according to a predictable sequence of activities and requests.

Nonjudgmental attitude. Not all student suggestions or responses will be positive or even particularly helpful. The facilitator needs to receive all suggestions with equanimity and seek to paraphrase them when possible so that all students can feel as though they have participated in any final solution

Valuing free discussion. Subsequent to a nonjudgmental attitude, the emphasis on an open and free discussion is important in establishing the democratic approach to social problem solving. In hectic schedules and classes where there is an increasing demand for more academics, such group time might initially seem to be a luxury. After all, many student concerns problems may to an adult perspective seem routine or so incidental as to be barely

noticed. In many such maters it would seem that perhaps old traditional and authoritarian means of rule setting would be more efficient. This might be true if the goal is immediate closure and a quick return to classroom decorum. However, a democratic classroom and school environment is a long term goal that demands open discussion and the "messiness" or apparent disorder that developing open and more democratic systems can bring

Dealing with barriers to successful meetings. It is likely some more verbal students will want to dominate the group and other more passive students will choose to sit back and disengage especially if there is some stress, conflict or tension around the particular issue being discussed. Social problem-solving groups can at times be emotionally charged, especially when the issue is one that may be of very recent origins. At the same time, the urgency of the concern provide a dynamic focus to teach a rational approach to problem- solving. Other barriers can include blaming others and the attempt to find a convenient scapegoat for the problem and in-group bickering, among other concerns. The high degree of

structure that effective open meetings require can provide the vehicle by which barriers to effective meetings can be addressed.

Open Ended Classroom Meetings. These meetings are more general and non-specific to concrete kinds of concerns. They are also more typically related to the overall curriculum being offered. For example, such meetings can be used to introduce new topics in practically any aspect of the curriculum. This would ideally provide a means by which the group facilitator could begin to know what prior knowledge as well as myths and misconceptions students might hold about any particular topic, whether it is a discussion of civil rights history, race and ethnicity or physical disability. It can be useful to answer such questions as; What do students know? What have they learned from television, movies and advertising about any particular subject or topic? In introducing new units and topics, the Open Ended Classroom meeting seeks to engage students' intellectual curiosity about issues and how those same issues do and will in some fashion affect their lives. Introduced at the beginning of a

unit or a schoolwide effort or campaign, structured programs and curricula can be tailored to the specific needs and interests of the students. These meetings can also be used to explore social and class and school climate issues that may not need immediate resolution or action.

Educational-Diagnostic Meetings. These open meetings, according to Glasser (1969) always have an educational focus. Such open meetings are largely evaluative in nature. Diagnostic meetings also request that students review previously studied and learned materials. With so much standardized testing presented to students in a multiple choice format, we face the risk of placing, once again, an excessive amount of value on learning disconnected facts. With reforms in standardized testing being considered, there will most likely be more emphasis on synthesizing thoughts and ideas. The Educational-Diagnostic Open meeting would seem to fit nicely into such trends. The facilitator/teacher would use this type of evaluative group to determine not just what facts have been retained but what connections and relevant

construction of meaning has taken place. More than just being evaluative, these open meetings allow students to participate in the number of relevant learning activities all consistent with a socially constructed perspective of integrating subject content as well as the personal experiences of students.

(1) **Group construction of meaning and relevance.** As part of a classroom group all students can participate in assigning meaning and importance to curriculum. Facts can be grounded in personally relevant themes. As with open ended meetings, personal experiences and perceptions are considered as necessary for deeper understanding of topics across the curriculum.

(2) **Allowing context to suggest new, more interdisciplinary approaches to understanding.** Important topics are seldom so isolated in today's world that a single subject area can provide the necessary depth to fully explore and experience the issues involved. This is where the intersection between science and literature,

music and mathematics can come to light and be more fully explored.

Not every classroom meeting will result in their desired outcome. This is especially true for the Social Problem -Solving open meeting. For example, students may be concerned with a playground bully or teasing and harassment directed toward peers and following the meeting such behavior might continue. There may even be the need for more formal disciplinary action of some kind. Not all social problems in the school and classroom are amenable to group intervention. However, two very important lessons can be learned even when the concrete resolution determined by the group does not appreciably alter the negative behaviors displayed. First, students are participating in and learning a rational, structured and ultimately democratic

approach to class and group concerns. The idea that such issues are given credibility as they are discussed in an open group forum gives students a voice in attempting to solve problems. Second, and consistent with Glasser's Control Theory practice, students are learning to take

responsibility for their own behavior, to treat their peers with respect and to begin to draw important boundaries between what they can do about a concern and where certain responsibilities must lie with others.

While it remains important to distinguish between Glasser's three kinds of open classroom meetings, facilitators should be constantly prepared for issues to arise that are unexpected and often surprising. When, especially younger students, are given an opportunity for self-expression that is open and nonjudgmental the unexpected can become the norm rather quickly. One example of this phenomenon was observed among a class of third graders. The topic was "Houses" and the type of group was Open-Ended prior to the beginning of a new curriculum unit. While considering the many amenities of relatively large suburban houses, one student offered the insight that on a recent trip to "the city" she saw people with no houses who were wrapped in blankets and sleeping on the streets. What had been a rather typical discussion turned quickly to other matters. The skilled facilitator can use that information to incorporate into

the open meeting and consider "homelessness" as a topic for a future open meeting. Additionally, the Educational Diagnostic meeting is also a likely place for social concerns and social issues to arise as students are challenged in the open meeting setting to personalize otherwise abstract knowledge and materials.

Again, William Glasser's distinctions between the three types of open meetings is a useful one and is most useful when new facilitators are planning open meeting sessions. However, as practically every experienced teacher and counselor knows, new and unexpected events can readily become part of the group process capturing the curiosity and imagination of students as well as reflecting issues relevant to home, school community, and society.

Research Findings on Open Meetings

Early Experimental Studies. Up until fairly recently only a relatively few studies have been done on open meetings. A few articles presented practitioners with some basic guidelines for the use of open classroom meetings (DeVoe,

1979; Martin, 1979; Dougherty, 1980). An early study intending to investigate specific outcomes was conducted by Zeeman and Martucci (1976) using nine learning disabled children (10-11 years old) as subjects. Findings suggested that the children participating increased their verbal output in class and experienced being less isolated from their non-learning disabled classmates. Indicators also suggested that hyperactivity was reduced as well.

In 1983, Omizo and Cubberly also investigated the effects of open meetings with learning disabled students. However, stronger experimental controls were used as students were placed in treatment ad nontreatment control groups. In addition, instead of just nine students as in the Zeeman and Martucci (1976) study, these researchers included a total of 56 children. The participants in the study were assigned to groups facilitated by teachers who had been trained in Glasser's Reality Therapy -based open meetings. Semi-weekly open meetings were conducted over a period of eleven weeks.

Students participating in the study were administered a Locus of Control Scale and the Dimensions of Self-Concept (a measure of self control). No significant findings were discovered with respect to locus of control. This may be in part due to the abstract nature of the concept of locus of control. However, the researchers did find some significance among certain subscales of the Dimensions of Self-Control (DOSC). These subscales were "Academic Interest and Satisfaction", "Anxiety" and "Levels of Aspiration". Speculating further about these subscales suggests the possible interpretation that the open classroom participants may have felt more overall satisfaction with school than the nontreatment or control group students. The significantly different scores on the "Levels of Aspiration" subscale might as well indicate an increased sense of "I Can" or self-efficacy (belief in one's ability and skills to meet self-determined goals and objectives). Finally, the learning disabled students participating in treatment (open meeting) groups reported a more factual and reality based perception of school than did their nontreatment counterparts.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

While this study is still limited by its relatively small numbers and somewhat questionable dependent measures, some basic support can be found for some of Glasser's most Important contentions about the positive potential effects of open classroom meetings. First, those students participating in open meetings may have found a "voice" where their specific concerns, interests and fears could be directly expressed and heard. Second, because of the "doing" and "acting" nature of Reality Therapy, a more cognitive, rational approach to school and its challenges and demands may have been developed, at least to some small extent, by those learning disabled students in the open meeting groups. Certainly the task-oriented approach of the open meeting structure may have in some measure produced the results summarized above. The researchers conclude " . . . that who have a personal hand in planning successful learning experiences and who are expected to be responsible for the resolution of social, behavioral and learning problems within their classrooms and schools become better learners." (Omizo and Cubberly, 1983, p.206.)

In a Canadian study, Sordahl and Sanche (1985) also attempted to determine how open classroom meetings might influence self-concept of school children. As with Omizo and Cubberly (1983) one impetus for the study came from the placement of special needs children in mainstream classroom settings. It was felt that classroom teachers could use open meetings to prevent developmental problems from occurring and also as a means of providing supplemental counseling to children. However, unlike the previous study, regular classroom teachers and students were participants. Students were assigned to treatment groups (Open Meetings) or control groups (Special Activities). Ninety-one students in all were administered the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale (PHSC) for Children, the Pupil Behavior Rating Scale (PBRS) and two scales specific to this study and specific to evaluating the open meeting process itself. The first scale was the Classroom Meeting Behavioral Rating Scale (CMB) and asked teachers to rate the extent and quality of student interaction and interpersonal behavior during open meeting sessions. The second scale, Classroom Meeting Self-Concept Rating Scale (CMSC) was an attempt to evaluate

children's' own perceptions of the groups and participation in them. This is the first study of its kind that attempts to evaluate and understand behavior and perceptions within the open meeting itself. Another important difference is that in this study biweekly sessions were held over a period of 20 weeks, nearly twice the length as the earlier study we previously considered.

Sordahl and Sanche (1985) did not find any significant differences on the measures of Self-concept as measured by

The Piers-Harris. Again, as with the earlier study, the global and rather abstract nature of the construct of self-construct would suggest that changes occur only over a fairly protracted time period developmentally and are therefore most likely to be the result of numerous life experiences, both in and out of formal classroom experiences. However, the situation specific measures did reach statistical significance. Students assigned to open meeting groups did show significantly greater gains on the measure of behavioral rating both on the PBRS and the CMB.

While these findings are positive and the design and improvement over previous studies of open meetings, there are still problems of teacher bias that needs to be considered. The teachers trained for five hours in open meetings were also the same teachers doing the behavioral rating and therefore some unintended bias may have entered into the study. Again this indicates how difficult it is to do highly controlled studies in real life classroom settings. Even with this caution, the authors seem justified in concluding that classroom meetings might serve a

" . . . an effective means of preventive counseling to entire classes of children by enhancing their problem-solving skills, their decision-making skills, their acceptance of responsibility , and their interpersonal skills." (Sordahl and Sanche,1985, p.358).

More Recent Qualitative Studies. The above studies lend some credibility, from a research perspective, to the use of open classroom meetings. However, they were relatively few in number and relied for the most part on global

measurements of self-concept. With the increased interest in education and the social sciences on qualitative studies, a series of studies were conducted in an attempt to extend the theory, research and practice of open classroom meetings to the everyday life of the school, classroom and student. It was the intent of this group of studies to connect the practice of open meetings to a clear and well defined set of procedures that could be replicated in real school circumstances while at the same time reflecting the uniqueness and variation of student and teacher experiences.

More intensive than previous studies, this group of studies undertook a project of biweekly open meetings at the elementary school level over the course of an entire school year. The project was driven by basic practitioner questions such as: (1) Why are some meetings more effective than others? (2) How do group facilitators improve their leadership skills in open meetings? (3) What are some important student perceptions of the open meeting process? (4) What are the most salient developmental issues at work in

This age group (grades 2 through 5)? Can effective procedures for conducting open meetings be determined and specified? In addition the researchers were interested in the application of open meetings to real student and school social problems: (6) Can open meetings promote social interest and social concern among students? (7) Can open meetings be utilized in a proactive manner to promote peaceful schools and thereby reduce aggression and violence? and (8) Do open meetings reduce the rate of referral to school principals for disciplinary purposes?

Results from the first of this series of studies (Emmett, et. al., 1996) focused on promoting nonviolence in schools. Teachers were recruited and trained from grades two through five in three separate elementary schools. Open meetings were videotaped and analyzed over the period of an entire school year. As mentioned earlier, the meetings were biweekly. Focus groups were held and later analyzed respective to perceptions about the efficacy of the open meetings. Of special interest were the student responses to the focus group inquiry. These students reported that their

participation in the open meeting process allowed them to accomplish several goals:

- Trust each other
- Learn how to be safe
- Get to know teachers
- Feel better about themselves
- Share common problems
- Understand and share feelings
- Learn appropriate behaviors
- Be able to contribute
- Solve Problems (Emmett,et.al., 1996, p.7)

Teachers agreed that there were a high degree of involvement among students. They reported several achievements of the open meeting process that included improving listening and communication skills, facilitating student to teacher levels of trust, more respectful behavior and interaction among peers, and overall greater interest in the school and classroom environment. It was concluded that these same skills, behaviors and attitudes identified by teachers and students in their summary focus groups were consistent with those skills necessary to

promote a nonviolent and peaceful school environment. This process of open meetings also squarely fulfills the counselor's role as someone who is both proactive in supporting a peaceful school environment by working in groups and classrooms to influence a large number of students and teachers.

Also, consistent with the use of open meetings is a "radiating effect". Teachers become trained open meeting facilitators and counselors become consultants and trainers. Although, beyond the scope of this particular review, it is possible that parent volunteers and other trained staff and paraprofessionals could be trained in the open meeting process in an attempt to reach a large number of students. This might prove to be specifically effective in schoolwide campaigns such as teaching conflict resolution and thereby promoting peaceful schools.

Another study in this series (Russo,et.al.,1996), drawing on the same data set of year long open meetings, sought to answer the question: "How can open classroom meetings affect the social interest and concern of

students?" (p.85). Social interest was defined as the ability to begin to enter into the perspective of others. It represented a shift from self-centeredness and egocentricity to being more concerned about the welfare of others or allocentricity,i.e., other centeredness. In some respects the researchers were interested in the metacognitive aspect of empathy and whether open classroom meetings were a process by which such metacognitive processes like empathy could begin at early developmental stages. Developmentally young children remain highly egocentric in their problem-solving style as they typically wish to end a problem so they can return to "their own business" or ego driven motives. While such ego driven motives are indicative of a high degree of self-centeredness, this problem-solving style may also provide the first essential step toward more sophisticated and empathic thinking, feeling and action.

Using content analysis to best summarize and analyze the videotaped sessions, it appeared that students began this vital transition step of better listening and attention skills. Such attention skills are essential if

empathy and social interest in the welfare and well -being of others is to develop. Meaning units were extracted from the analysis of the videotapes yielding a list of fifteen meaning units. These units included (1) sharing ideas (2) solving problems, (3) learning from and about others, (4) having the class help you face problems, (5) everybody listens, (6) getting concerned and helping others, (7) keeping friends by using "put-ups" only, (8) learning what we have in common, (9) sharing feelings, (10) knowing what others like to do, (11) decreasing name calling, (12) stopping 'blurting out", (13) trusting people, (14) solving problems for others and making them feel better and, (15) having the whole class feel better about each others (Russo, et.al., 1996, p. 87). Basic themes derived from the meaning units were, "Solving", "Sharing" and "Caring".

In the final analysis, it was suggested that open classroom meetings might be effectively be used to develop social interest by focusing on a developmental sequence strongly implied in the above summarized content analysis. That is, first focus on memory and attention skills in the

open meetings. These skills provide developmental building blocks for later, more complex and sophisticated cognitive processes like social interest. Second, make sure in doing this that the topics for the open meetings are well sequenced and earlier themes are revisited and attached to specific behaviors. Third, facilitators should encourage the use of thematic open meetings, not only over time in a particular grade level but across grades in a larger school wide effort.

Basic Steps and Procedures

The open classroom meeting is built into the structure of the educational enterprise by working directly with students to discover aspects of the home and school experience. In this way they attempt to reflect on the classroom and school environment and the topicality to the curriculum being delivered. Problem-solving open meetings are typically used to bring about some constructive changes in the school and classroom climate and address social concerns of particular relevance to students and staff. At the beginning of instituting open classroom meetings in the

class or preferably throughout the school, facilitators typically direct the students to consider certain topics.

Later in the process students not only think of their own topics but will with minimal help, write their own open meetings. One reason for directing topics at the outset is to choose important and timely topics but of sufficient focus to allow for some kind of tangible outcome or plan of action. It is essential that open meeting participants, whether children or adults don't come to see the effort as merely a way to discuss and air grievances.

While talking about issues in the abstract has it place and value, consistent with Glasser's Reality Therapy model, behavior, action and a sense of present and future orientation is necessary for success. Topics can vary greatly with input from teachers, counselors, students, school staff and parents but should try to stay with the above guidelines at the outset of practicing the open meeting format.

Ground Rules. Every open meeting begins with a recitation of the ground rules. It becomes a sort of ritual that

distinguishes the interaction about to take place from other activities of the day. In addition, students are now away from their desks and seated in a circle either in chairs or on the floor. The ground rules are usually posted but always read aloud and should ideally include the following group procedures:

1. Everyone has the right to speak.
2. Everyone is free to "pass' on that right.
3. One person speaks at a time.
4. Respect others, no "put-downs"!
5. Stay on the topic and
6. Maintain the confidentiality of the open meeting.

Again, the ground rules help to begin each meeting in an orderly and structured manner.

Warm-Up Question. The Warm-Up Question begins the open meeting in a predictable ad non-threatening manner. In this fashion, participants are encouraged to engage in the group but speaking briefly about something that is fun, that all group participants can readily relate to. The Warm-Up Question should be creative and relate in some manner to

the topic but at the same time allow participants to externalize those ideas. For example, a group on the topic "Helpful Uses of Humor in Class" might ask students to recall a humorous TV show or personality. The real intent of this stage of the open meeting process is to reinforce the structure of going around the circle and having each one respond to an enjoyable, easy and nonthreatening query. Remember students are free to "pass" even at this step. After the circle has been completed the facilitator might quickly asked in anyone who passed would like to add something. However, at first you might best avoid asking the student who passed directly or by name as the right to pass should remain free of any perceived coercion.

Defining Question. It is useful to note that the Defining Question represents a move toward greater structure and specificity. The topic is now being introduced along with greater constraints on the conversation. More is probably required of the facilitator here as typically a written list of ideas, terms, etc. is being kept. It is also important to note the definition of any particular problem

may possess some very special elements. You are not searching for a

textbook or dictionary definition but one that fits the context of the topic, situation and particulars of events and problems that have lead up to the social problem itself. Keeping notes of a board or flip chart is necessary for later reference and making sure that the topic definition has reached some sort of consensus. The eventual definition should not only reflect the real world of the students but also have elements that are focused, concrete and behavioral. Any potential plan of action will need to be action oriented rather than simply self-reflective.

- **Personalizing Question.** At this stage in the open meeting process the group (class) should have ideally reached consensus about the topic and the general behavioral elements of the topic. The Personalizing Question can be seen as an anchor of sorts. That is, by connecting the definition to individual, personal experience even those students who may not be directly involved in the topic or

problem at hand are able to develop some connection to those that are more directly caught up in the issue at hand. The idea that when any group of students are having difficulty there might be ways for all of us to effectively help is a means to develop a sense of collective, group responsibility.

In this manner the Personalizing Question is intended to create a sense of connection, involvement and excitement about the process. More than at any other point in the process, issues of trust and safety are at work here. More students, particularly those unfamiliar with the process and those for whom a sense of trust has not yet emerged, will "pass' at this step. It is necessary for the facilitator to use encouragement and reframing techniques when "personalizing" the topic. Special care also needs to be given to maintaining the integrity of the ground rules at this important juncture. It is difficult to say that the Personalizing Question is the most important stage. But the Personalizing Question does present a crucial shift to get beneath the surface of the topic to connect at a level

where affective involvement in the topic becomes a potential for all the open meeting participants.

Challenge Question. The next shift that takes place occurs as the facilitator leads the discussion toward some new action. This action plan can be of two types, (1) a definite concrete action undertaken by consensus and prior input of the group participants or (2) a request for each group member to consider a new course of personal action as a challenge to alter previous ways of thinking and action.

In this latter way, open ended challenge questions can lead to subsequent open meetings. For example, an open meeting on class and school leadership might challenge students to consider ways in which they could provide leadership given earlier defining qualities. A written essay or journal entry might help the student to make a behavioral commitment while maintaining some privacy and confidentiality to the process.

Ten Guidelines for Successful Meetings

1. Maintain a Consistent Structure. It is the general structure of the open meeting process that allows for a

rapid meeting (15-25 minutes) that can include the whole class (up to 24-30 students).

2. Keep Responses Brief and Fast-Paced. Because the open meeting is often used with whole classes, facilitators often limit the responses to a phrase or two without further elaboration or description. A fast-paced meeting can be stimulating and exciting without being rushed but that is a balance that takes some practice to achieve.

3. Keep an On-going Record. It is important to maintain a good record of ideas. For this purpose, the facilitator or ideally co-facilitator records on a board of flipchart important comments. If the facilitator is doing the group alone and uses notes, then they need to be briefly summarized as a way to shift to the next question or open meeting stage.

4. Progressively Turn Over More and More Responsibility to the Group Members. This guideline is more specific to follow-up groups and to classes that have accumulated some experience with conducting open meetings. It is, as mentioned earlier, not unusual for students to request an

open meeting. At this point, the counselor or teacher can engage the students in writing one that reflects their needs and interests. It is, however, probably not desirable that students actually conduct the meeting itself

5. Be Inviting to Less Productive Members. It is fairly common for less assertive students to "pass" or simply restate what another more verbal group member has previously stated. It is important for the facilitator, as is true in most any small group, to finds ways to reframe, add, or expand the statement as a means of encouragement for participation.

6. Use Humor when Appropriate. Do the unexpected! Help students use humor to provide perspective especially to conflicts. Mild exaggeration, funny metaphors and analogies and word play can all provide a shift in perspective that allows students to imagine alternative outcomes and behaviors.

7. Recognize the Importance of Question "Shifts". As stated earlier, each new question represents a shift in a couple of important directions. First, each question focuses more deeply on a personal experiential response and therefore becomes more sensitive as the facilitator moves from the nonthreatening Warm-Up Question to the Personalizing Question. Second, there is a shift from external considerations with the Warm-Up and Definition Questions to a more internal or interpersonal dimension with the Personalizing and Challenge Questions. Facilitators need to be aware of these complementary patterns and seek to make the shift smoothly so that the logic of the process becomes a more or less natural process for students.

8. Be Willing to Repeat and Reinforce Ground Rules. The excitement and stimulation of the Problem-Solving Open meeting, especially when emotionally charged can lead to several students all vying for speaking time simultaneously. As with any group, more verbal participants might try to dominate the discussion or feel pressured to attempt long explanations. The Ground Rules

help to reinforce the structure of the open meeting process. In turn, the structure also reinforces group safety and seeks to invite and give equal opportunities for all students to participate.

9. Be Open to Surprises. No matter how well each meeting is planned and how timely and relevant the topic is, surprises are always a potential. For example, what about the student is reveals more than is appropriate for a problem-solving group? How about the student who attempts to dominate the discussion? More likely, what about abrupt changes in topics? These and other "surprises" are inevitable. Again, a polite acknowledgment of the issue and an equally calm and politely return to the structure via the ground rules is usually sufficient to handle most surprises

10. Maintain an Action Oriented Outcome. It is important to maintain a clear focus on the outcome, especially of the problem-solving open meeting. Students derive the greatest sense of responsibility and satisfaction from being able to arrive at concrete outcomes and solutions that will hold out the potential to make a more positive

school and classroom environment. The outcome should be one that includes the whole group and can be observed directly in the form of modified or new behavior. It should not be merely the absence of a noxious behavior such as stopping teasing or bullying behavior but the active presence of behaviors of a more positive and therefore prosocial kind. This latter point can take some ingenuity on the part of the facilitator but should be considered an essential element of an action plan.

Even an action plan that fails can be reframed as a successful, concrete attempt at addressing important issues. That is, now the group or class is finally working together on the problem and it is just a matter of finding the appropriate and effective plan.

Facilitator Skills

General skills of group facilitator and leadership apply to open meetings but there are a few skills that, while not unique to implementing effective open meetings are emphasized.

Identify Cognitive Developmental Level of Students. Problem-solving groups typically require the participants to both define difficult and complex school and social issues and transform that definition into an action plan. Such action plans need to include the potential to significantly alter old, unwanted behaviors. Even children at lower elementary grades can handle reasonably complex topics if the facilitator holds a clear grasp of cognitive development. What do 8, 10 or 12-year-old students understand about anger, name-calling and can they anticipate the short and long term effects on the classroom environment? If the facilitator does not appreciate cognitive developmental levels of understanding, there will be a breakdown in defining the topic and moving from a definition to an action plan in the form of a Challenge Question.

Restating and Clarification. Restating and Clarification is a general individual and group counseling skill that adds to, modifies or expands a group members statement so that it has a greater potential to contribute to the action plan as a goal or outcome.

Facilitators might state, "Let me see if I understand you correctly. Are you saying (thinking or feeling) . . .?" The completed restatements by summarizing and connecting the statement to the topic and overall group topic and context. The teaching element of reframing skills suggests to students that their responses should ideally contribute to the overall direction of the open meeting.

Structuring Skills. Providing a clear and focused sense of direction, setting time limits, connecting the steps in the open meeting process and establishing and maintaining effective Ground Rules are all part of the structuring process. The open meeting is a clearly structured group event and therein lies its sense of safely and democratic purpose. It is for solving group (school and classroom) issues and as such de-emphasizes individual and personal concerns.

Keeping a focus on the topic at hand and away from the "traps" of individual and personal entanglements is a challenge for the beginning group facilitator, but a focus

on the inherent structure of the open meeting will be helpful in this regard.

Acting "As If". This particular skills is probably most constructive at the Challenge Question Stage. It is basically a cognitive skill that challenges individuals and groups to act "As if" they are capable of more than current behavioral patterns might suggest. It is a technique based on encouragement and belief in change, but it is also squarely a cognitive-behavioral technique best described by Donald Meichenbaum (1977).

In order to effectively change behavior Meichenbaum suggests that a three-stage process is necessary. This process includes (1) Self-observation, (2) Self-Instruction and (3) New Coping Skills. While typically applied to individual counseling and change processes, there are some important relationships to the open meeting process. Self-observation asks the basic question of the group: What is happening here? And, How can we best determine and understand it? This, of course, is part of the Defining Question. Self -Instruction suggests that we can clarify

and reevaluate our thinking and affective responses to the topic. Can we frame or construct the issue in a way that allows us to look at this topic differently? Perhaps, more expansively? Can we think differently about our own personal experiences and sense of involvement (Personalizing Question)? And third, New Coping Skills rest with the Challenge Question. How can we act in a manner, individually and collectively that will help bring about a more positive environment, and finally: How might such changes benefit both the individual and the group?

Schoolwide Approaches to Classroom Meetings

The effective use of open meetings can be enhanced when it is seen as a part of the overall school environment. This happens when the school administration adopts the open meeting concepts as one means to create a peaceful and positive school environment. It can also happen more informally as individual building counselors and school psychologists recognize the value of open meetings and go into classrooms and train interested teachers as co-facilitators.

When open meetings are used across grades, students can become very skilled at participating in structured groups for the purpose of both curriculum development and social problem solving. Being part of the democratic open meeting process becomes a natural aspect of everyday classroom practice when students have been exposed to open meeting process over the course of several grades. Teachers report that students come to appreciate the opportunity to solve problems internally and in a way that reflects their own personal experience with that issue and topic. Student participation in classroom, team sports, clubs and other group activities can reflect a strong sense of democratic learning or they can be hierarchical and rely on an appeal to the single source of authority in the form of the teacher, principal, band director or coach.

Implementation

Summary. Open meetings can have a wide variety of uses within the classroom and school setting. They can be readily adapted to small groups in many different forms including athletic teams and other groups in an effort to create a greater sense of team or group cohesion. Their inherent structure, derived from basic Reality Therapy approach, lends them a present-centered and problem-oriented nature while allowing them to be situated in a particular school and classroom climate.

In addition to solving typical concerns that focus on climate issues open meetings can become part of an overall approach building a more democratic sense of community among students, teachers and school staff. Students participating in the open meeting process over a protracted period of time and across grade levels report a greater sense of ownership in the educational enterprise as their own concerns directly expressed problem-solving activities.

References

DeVoe, M.(1979). Classroom meetings: An approach to transpersonal education. Elementary School Guidance & Counseling,14, 143-144.

Dougherty,A.M. (1980). Designing classroom meetings for the middle school child. School Counselor, 28, 127- 132

Emmett, J.D., Monsour,F., Lundeberg, M., Russo, T., Secrist, K. Lindquist, Moriarity, S.,and Uhren, P. (1996). Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 31, 3-10.

Glasser, W.(1969) . Schools without failure. NY: Harper & Row.

Martin, R.J. (1979). An experiential approach to teaching preservice about group-centered teaching and classroom meetings. Humanist Educator, 17, 167-171.

Meichenbaum, D. (1997). Cognitive behavioral therapy: An integrated approach. NY: Plenum Press.

Omizo, M.M., & Cubberly, W.E. (1983). The effects of

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

reality therapy classroom meetings on self-concept and locus of control among learning disabled students. The Exceptional Child, 30, 201-209.

Russo, T., Emmett, J., Lundeberg, M., Monsour, F., Secrist, K., Lindquist,N., Moriarity,S. and Uhren, P. (1996). Open meetings: Facilitating the development of social interest, Journal of Reality Therapy, XV, 82-89.

Russo, T. & Monsour, F. (1998). Open classroom meetings school discipline. Kentucky Counseling Association Journal, 17, 7-10.

Sordahl, S.N., & Sanche, R.P. (1985). The effects of classsroom meetings on self-concept and behavior. Elementary School Guidance & Counseling,20, 49-56.

Zeeman, R. & Martucci, I. (1976). The application of classroom meetings to special education. Exceptional Children, 42, 461-462.